

26 NOV 1973

P-Shales, Tom.
SOC 4.01.4 The Serpent

Backward, Upside Down and Serpentine

By Tom Shales

Perhaps not since Hitchcock's "Topaz" has there been an espionage adventure so lifeless, feckless and nearly endless as Henri Verneuil's "The Serpent," now at the Uptown. In fact, it makes "Topaz" look like a clever thriller and even such dogs as John Huston's recent "The Macintosh Man" seem vital and coherent.

"The Serpent" is plagued with one of the most critical cases of inverted exposition in movie history. Every plot turn is revealed in the least suspenseful and credible way possible, and when it's all over you get the feeling the story has been told backward, upside down, inside out or all three.

Though pieced together with fragments of actual events—including such hot topics as the shot-down U-2 plane piloted by Francis Gary Powers—the tale seems outlandish at every juncture. It begins with a messy defection to the West by a high-ranking official of the Soviet secret police, the "KGB." No sooner is this prize package of defection delivered to the CIA headquarters in suburban Washington than intensive questioning begins—when, he is repeatedly asked, did he last have sexual relations with his wife?

This completed, the film plods on. An apparently angry narrator tries turning it into a documentary on the CIA. The agency stores data on "40 million punch cards," he tells us. Then we are

shown yards of grainy footage from old Soviet newsreels, with hoked-up inserts that try to put Yul Brynner, as the KGB defector, into Russian history. It doesn't work, and neither does Brynner, who plays his part as a combination Siamese king and cowboy robot—two of his past movie roles, as it happens.

The film has a rather amazing cast, including

Henry Fonda (as CIA chief "Allan Davies"), Dirk Bogarde, Philippe Noiret and, very briefly, Virna Lisi. We also find out whatever happened to both Robert Alda and Farley Granger; they ended up with small parts in clinkers like this one.

The story wanders over to Europe and there stoops to a cliché from the movies of yore: the mysterious killer whose face is hidden but who carries an identifying gimmick. In this case, the gimmick is a cigarette case with a gold serpent on it.

There may be a civilized story here someplace, but Verneuil never finds it. The ruthlessness of espionage has been quite exhaustively belabored in plenty of other films, anyway, and during these days of detente, the project seems especially misbegotten.

Even the cinematographer neglected or refused to focus his camera. Just as well. The pallid blur on the screen is an apt visual counterpart to the floundering script. "The Serpent" should be the bottom half of a double bill at an abandoned drive-in.